

CRITICAL DIGEST

Vol. II No. 4

November 7, 1949

The Weekly That Keeps You Informed Of The Current Broadway Critical Scene

Quick Glance at New N.Y. Shows -- Digests on inside pages

Montserrat-Fulton, 10/29/49. French play starring Emlyn Williams drew slightly more 'Con' reviews from the daily and magazine critics than favorable reviews. Times, Mirror, Sun, Eagle, Variety, Billboard, New Yorker, Newsweek, Wall Street Journal and Cue all voted against it. Most of the critics praised the Hellman script, but didn't like the way she directed the play. Williams drew praise from all the critics, whether they liked the play or not. Gabriel, Cue, deemed the show a "molehill masquerading as a funeral mound".

Lost In The Stars-Music Box, 10/30/49. Majority of daily and magazine critics raved about Anderson-Weill musical tragedy. Many called it a "work of art". Trio of 'Con' votes from Post, Journal American and World Telegram came as objections to the way the huge amount of talent and material was blended together. Todd Duncan and 10 year old Herbert Coleman came in for top praise. Garland, Journal American, thought Leslie Banks got "lost" in the play. Watts, Post, said very little was lacking save inspiration.

Regina-46th Street Theatre, 10/31/49. After most of the critics had voiced concern as to why anyone should have bothered to turn the Lillian Hellman classic 'The Little Foxes' into a musical, they had a decided split of opinion on the musical tragedy itself. Mirror, Compass, Post, Sun, Journal American, World Telegram, Newark News and Women's Wear Daily all praised what they termed an "interesting theatrical experiment". Chapman, News, accused Blitzstein of writing "foreground, not background" music. Barnes, Herald Tribune, was dissatisfied at the result; while Atkinson, Times, liked the performances, but didn't think the music added anything to the story. Several of the papers sent their music reviewers to cover the opening, also. Thomson, Herald Tribune, didn't think the play was very musical. Criticisms on the merits of Jane Pickens ranged from "superb" to "plays part like Mae West".

Magazine Reviewers Look At The New Plays -- Digests on inside pages

Touch And Go-Broadhurst, 10/13/49. Clurman, New Republic, admitted that he had absolutely no opinion on the Abbott musical; but he did confess that he laughed at three of the numbers. George Jean Nathan was more forthright. After denying for two-thirds of a column that it was untrue that he never praised anything, Nathan okayed the witty sketches, songs and dancing in the revue.

Keeping The Record Straight

Twelfth Night, which was scheduled to close October 31, will be continued for two more weeks. Producers report increase in business as reason for continuing play; cast also took cuts in salary to keep the revival open. If business improves, play will continue run past two week period.

Browning Version playing order has been reversed, Maurice Evans announced. English star tested playing humorous Harlequinade as curtain raiser to the more serious title play one evening. Result was successful, so practice will be continued for the rest of the run. Thus criticisms and digests must be read with this fact firmly in mind.

N.Y.C. Criticism At A Glance - page 877 -- Cumulative index issued monthly

Copyright 1949 by T.M. Kraus, Editor, 505 Fifth Avenue, N.Y.C. 17, N.Y. \$10 Yearly

Montserrat

a. Times-Cons: Mechanical, instead of harrowing as it might have been. Williams gives perfect performance, direction is on monotonous side, other actors don't create tangible characters. Off stage murders wanton.-Atkinson.

b. Herald Tribune-So-See: Hellman written brilliant adaption with emotional power. Series of melodramatic vignettes which never achieve the eminence of tragedy. Spasmodic melodrama rather than play of consequence. Williams plays in bravura style, Redfield far less successful in the title role.-Barnes.

c. News-Pro: Brutal and rebellious drama, all guts and drive. Splendid malevolent performance by Williams, moving one by Redfield, satisfactory cast.-Chapman.

d. Mirror-Cons: Script uneven, insufficiently motivated. Between dramatic peaks lie some valleys of stereotyped verbosity. Could have been moving, absorbing for outlines for gripping drama and there. But comes across footlights instead as obvious melodrama.-Coleman.

e. Compass-Pro: Thrilling play, with little speeches here and there that cut like knives and reach the bone. Such a play, with restricted action, needs to be acted with a skill and comprehension very close to perfection. These actors and their director are not quite good enough. Most fine enough though in their fragmentary way to provide moments that cause the listeners to choke with emotion.-Pollock.

f. Post-Pro: Williams gives stunning performance. Play is oddly less powerful in its emotional impact as the theme might have suggested, but it is provocative and thoughtful.-Watts.

g. Sun-Cons: Hellman crowded lot of theatre into grim, harrowing play, and it is well played by excellent cast, but it is not a drama of sustained impact. Is a sharply disappointing venture of the early season. The drama lacks variety.-

Morehouse.

h. Checking The Theatre Ads -- "A perfect performance..." is the 24 point headline prefacing Atkinson, Times, comments on Montserrat in the Times ad. The ad quotes the Times critic as saying "Emlyn Williams gives a perfect performance of frigid fury, contempt and decisions." But this is hardly the idea Atkinson put across in his review, as the above digest plainly shows.

i. Journal American-Pro: Grim and fascinating, but should have been more so. Message of play concerns real, rather than make-believe liberty. Williams underplays his role.-Garland.

j. World Telegram-Pro: Provocative, shattering. Hellman direction accumulates magnificent gyroscopic power. Whatever your saturation point, you will not forget this play. Williams expertly dominates the play.-Hawkins.

k. Brooklyn Eagle-Cons: May have suffered in translation, but with exception of Williams, it hardly added kudos to Hellman. Situation pregnant with an overworked possibility.-Currie.

l. Newark News-Pro: Skillful adaptation, grim unrelenting strategy of mental and physical torment with expert cast. Play has vigorous things to say in literate fashion, but manner is often too heavily worked for complete audience comfort.-Field.

Montserrat

a. Variety-Cons: Powerful but heavy drama with limited boxoffice appeal. Play's lack of movement appears to be aggravated by Hellman's rigid, unimaginative staging. Williams theatrically effective. Doubtful material for films.-Hobe.

b. Billboard-Cons: Fine sets, excellent actors, but never achieved any real pitch of excitement or suspense. Dramatic content barely strong enough to sustain a one act play. Windy, repetitions first act, second viewed with same detachment as a series of Goya horror drawings. Direction uneven, static play.-Francis.

c. Morning Telegraph-So-So: Play is important, if not perfect. Hellman written her usual fine play, but stumbles in the direction. Suggest she give up direction and stay with playwrighting, her truest love. Williams magnificent, others could have been better.-Bolton.

d. Women's Wear Daily-Pro: Soul-searing adaptation packed with trenchant and remorseless power. Hellman direction taut and vibrant, acting is superlative. Not for those who go to theatre exclusively for escapist diversion. But thoughtful theatre goers who want to see a significant, vital and revealing drama should by no means pass it up.-

e. Checking The Theatre Ads -- "Strong drink, highly stimulating" reads the 24 point type headline before Pollock, Compass, quote in the Times ad praising Montserrat "Montserrat" is a strong drink, highly stimulating. It is a thrilling play, with speeches that cut like knives and reach the bone. It has terrific and enormous pertinence in the U.S. and everywhere else in the year 1949." The interesting thing about the "quote" is that the first sentence is from the first paragraph, the second sentence from the eighth paragraph, and the third from the final paragraph.

f. New Yorker-Cons: Interminable, repetitive, only occasionally eloquent debate. First rate performances, handsome set.-Gibbs.

g. Newsweek-Cons: Falls considerably short of its promise, faults appear inherent in the original. Outward excitement that rarely penetrates to the emotions.

h. Time-Pro: As melodrama it is often tense, though sometimes talky. As writing has much of Hellman's sharpness and bite. Playgoers may be fascinated to watch show's serious and stagy elements fighting for upper hand.

i. Cue-Cons: Melchill masquerading as a funeral mound. Original may have some swifter tension, some saving balance, or variety. There should be at least one performance beside the miscast Williams, which would not end in wail, wallow.-Gabriel.

j. Wall Street Journal-Cons: All elements of good play present, but in blending magic of theatre slipped away leaving a residue of admiration mingled with disappointment.-Cooke.

k. Journal of Commerce-So-So: Competent adaptation and direction, showy piece of stagecraft. Full of showy production, has a few drab stretches.-Single.

Lost In The Stars

a. Variety-Pro: Tender, moving tastefully done. First half starts slowly, fails to project across the footlights, the second half kindles the emotions and rises to a soaring climax. No instant hits, but several agreeable songs. Direction usually brings production superbly to life.-Hobe.

Lost In The Stars

a. Billboard-Pro: Impressive. Of its kind, it is a considerable work of art. Likely to find limited audience because it is work of art. Anderson story line caught pathos of novel. Weill has integrated crescendo of fear and frustration into its music, director has staged it with sensitivity and occasional impact.-Francis.

b. Morning Telegraph-Pro: Overall impact is that a needed, important job has been done, that it occasionally falters, does not prevent the full flow of emotion being produced. Score is moving and haunting as story, Duncan is magnificent, rest cast excellent. Count it as winner.-Bolton.

c. Newark News-Pro: One of the finest achievements in many a year. Brings distinction and rewarding substance to a lagging Broadway season. Extraordinary luminous folk opera. Duncan portrayal truly inspired and perfect. Not since 'Porgy & Bess' have we encountered any stage exhibit of this special sort to approach it in appeal and pleasure.

d. Women's Wear Daily-Pro: Moving score, book catches austere beauty and simplicity of novel, well trained choral group, fine cast -- all brought to fluid life by expert staging, show gives promise of becoming one of the major events of the new season. Producers can be justifiably proud of job.-Allen.

e. Newsweek-Pro: Clever economic rewriting of novel, vivid sets, striking direction, balanced score. Duncan magnificent. Only fault is that play doesn't capture full scope of the novel.

f. Time-So-So: Production is kind of choral drama, has its merits. But with half as much it might have been twice as good. On stage too often a wave of honest feeling brings a backwash of sentimentality.

g. Cue-Pro: I think it beautiful, a generous evening in many ways. Might wish Duncan portrayed a more sharply shaded character, but his voice makes the Weill songs stunning.-Gabriel.

i. Wall Street Journal-Pro: Impressive theatrical creation done in eloquent terms. Without Duncan it would not have seemed so tragically poetic. Almost entirely successful treatment of difficult theme.-Cooke.

j. Journal of Commerce-Pro: Eloquent musical tragedy devoid of the conventional claptrap. Impressive musical score, Duncan superb. Book good, but not without its soapbox characteristics.-Single.

k. Compass-Pro: Beautiful tragedy flowed across the stage filling it with color, melody, force of fine Negro talents. Gratifying that so much money, time and skill expended in assurance that people want to see a story that ends with a white man asking a Negro to be his friend. A large consignment of Negro influence in show,-
Pollock.

Touch And Go

l. George Jean Nathan-Pro: Show is much to my liking, in spite of those people who murmur that I don't like anything. Three of its four sketches are original, witty, and amusing. Songs likewise, good dancing. Quite as good as 'Lend An Ear', which wasn't without its bleak spots, either.

Touch And Go

a. New Republic-No comment. "It really doesn't matter much about a service you like it or don't -- principles are rarely involved. I have no opinion on 'Touch and Go', but it is perhaps my duty to note that it is a hit. Three numbers made me laugh, the climax of the last can't be described in a family magazine.-Glzman.

Lost In The Stars

b. Times-Pro: Honorable musical drama. Good many of early scenes written in a hurry, sketchily. But when Anderson comes to overwhelming climax of tragedy he takes the time and words to write a grand and enlightening scene with unadorned beauty. Most of Weill music overflowing with same compassion that Paton brought to novel. Some scenes done with heavy touch, but theme is noble, music deep, dramatic and beautiful. Illuminating and memorable drama.-Atkinson.

c. Herald Tribune-Pro: Searing musical tragedy, excitement, flavor, heart and stern authority. Adaptation with immense skill and fidelity, Weill score beautifully integrated, staged superbly. Harrowing theatrical experience, but one of deep satisfaction. It does great honor to the season.-Bernes.

d. News-Pro: A work of art, all elements of musical stage put together in an inspiring manner, Anderson's libretto and lyrics are work of artist, Weill's score fits novel, libretto, lyrics like true and splendid creation. Fine cast. No song and dance show, have to work it out, but it will reward you.-Chapman.

e. Mirror-So-So: Thrilling pictorially and sometimes musically, but lacks the distinction one expects from Anderson, Weill and Mamoulian. Just does not tug at your emotions as it should. Is artistic, rather than commercial achievement. There is much in it to praise, though not, we suspect, quite sufficient to give it wide popularity.-Coleman.

f. Post-Con: Very little lacking save inspiration. Anderson's simplicity has rather unpersuasive quality and eloquence is but rarely forthcoming. Weill's music modest, unobtrusive but it did not seem at first hearing particularly interesting or distinguished. Direction is fluid and imaginative. Duncan occasionally suave, glib, but sings splendidly-Watts.

g. Sun-Pro: Beautiful and frequently enthralling musical tragedy. I was in South Africa last December, show brought me right back. Show moves swiftly, play's scenes written tautly, score impressive, choral work superb. Colorful and soaring musical show. Let's be grateful for it.-Morchouse.

h. Journal American-Con: Ornate and complicated, mislaid simplicity, the new arrival is most hurtfully in need of. Too much words and music, production and direction, scenery and costume, and group singing. Most of it is good, some of it is excellent. Leslie Banks is lost.-Garland.

i. World Telegram-Con: Mood is dreamy, hypnotic, childlike and melancholy, problem is big and remote as stars. Next to no impact until late in play. Visually play is tender, direction often gives it a bit, though it cannot overcome a basic ethereality of dramatic substance.-Hawkins.

j. Brooklyn Eagle-Pro: Ended with emotional impact seldom witnessed in these parts, had begun in slow movement. Weill had field day with music, cast fine, sets imposing.-Currie.

Regina

a. Times-So-So: To one theatre goer of long standing, Regina has softened a heart play. What Blitzstein has added does not compensate for the loss in force, directness and directness. Opera in modern style written for lovers of music. Singularly alert and flaring performance by all concerned.-Atkinson.

b. Herald Tribune-Cons: Musical embellishments have not illuminated the Hellman work. Score too strident or too Dixieland to add anything of value to a play of great clarity and power. Pickens plays title role in almost Mac West fashion, Gillette far better in daughter role. The result is exceedingly disappointing.-Barnes. Virgil Thomson, reviewing the musical part of the play considered the score very theatrical, but not very musical.

c. News-Cons: Most of time music and singing got in way of what used to be a good play. Sounds as if Blitzstein wrote foreground music, not background music, not made it into a valid semi-opera. Carefully cast and produced, but can't remember any of the tunes.-Chapman.

d. Mirror-Pro: Arresting work, uneven, almost always aggressive and tremendously disturbing when at its best. Weakens power of score by extraneous jazz interludes. Outstanding cast. Pickens acting better than her singing. Show has superlative moments, one of most interesting experiments in our time.-Coleman.

e. Compass-Pro: Theatre struck gold for third night in succession. Show is like a series of electric sparks leaping across a gap. Sometimes music beats your brains out, sometimes it enchants. Staging is revelation, best I've ever seen. Something new and shining to the work of the actors and singers and the show.-Pollock.

f. Post-Pro: Great deal of skillful, intelligent, imaginative, showmanship has gone into performance, though I doubt that a score adds anything impressive to what was virtual perfection in its own realistic medium, the result is an interesting theatre experiment. Admirable production.-Watts.

g. Sun-Pro: Adroitly directed, well cast and sung. You may prefer your Little Foxes straight, but as Regina it is to be recommended as a fascinating experiment.-Morchouse.

h. Journal American-Pro: Musical drama is a good enough American grand opera until a better one comes along. Real achievement for all concerned. Director keeps the evening on the up-beat, first and last a good show.-Garland.

i. World Telegram-Pro: The most exciting musical theatre I know since Rosenkavalier. Tense, taut story released in musical terms in a splendidly rich fabric of sound. Pickens is utter mistress of some forbidding imperious music.-Hawkins.

j. Brooklyn Eagle-Cons: Plot and meaning drowned out in meaningless song that became a chant better spoken in conversational English. Rash assumption to suppose everyone knows the story. As experiment interesting, music critics probably applaud it, but I was just bewildered.-Currie.

k. Newark News-Pro: Vibrantly thrilling experience, daring experiment. Those who know plot best appreciate it, others may find it difficult. Score delicately imagined Pickens is striking and skilled in part.-Field.

l. Women's Wear Daily-Pro: Work of patient labor, dedication, inspired art. Notable and distinguished achievement. Score impresses, cast fine.-Dash.

N.Y.C. Criticism At A Glance -- Ratings of 30 Reviewers

A Streetcar Named Desire-Barrymore, 12/3/47. Pro: Times, Tribune, News, Mirror, PM, Post, Sun, Journal-American, World Telegram, Brooklyn Eagle, Newark News, Women's Wear Daily, Wall Street Journal, Journal of Commerce, Morning Telegraph, Variety, Billboard, Theatre Arts, Commonweal, SRL, Cue, Newsweek, Nation, New Republic, New Yorker. Con: Daily Worker, Catholic World, Christian Science Monitor. So-So: George Jean Nathan, Times.

As The Girls Go-Broadway, 11/14/48. Pro: 19 reviews. Con: Tribune, Star, Morning Telegraph, Commonweal. So-So: News, World Telegram, Theatre Arts, Commonweal, Daily Worker, Christian Science Monitor. No review in Saturday Review.

Born Yesterday-Miller, 2/4/46. All 30 reviewers vote "Pro".

Death of a Salesman-Morosco, 2/10/49. Pro: 28 reviews. Con: Nation. So-So: Time

Detective Story-Hudson, 3/23/49. Pro: 20 reviews. Unchecked reviews are Eagle, Newark News, Daily Worker, Nathan, Catholic World, Christian Science Monitor, Saturday Review, Nation, New Republic, Compass.

Diamond Lil-Plymouth, 3/23/49. 30 Reviews for Mac, 30 against her play.

Goodbye My Fancy-Bock, 11/17/48. Pro: 18 reviews. Con: World Telegram, Daily Worker, Wall Street Journal, Catholic World, Nation, New Republic. So-So: Nathan, Cue, SRL, Time. No review in Compass, Christian Science Monitor.

Kiss Me, Kate-Century, 12/31/48. Pro: 28 reviews. Con: New Republic. None in Nation.

Lend An Ear-Mansfield, 12/16/48. Pro: 25 reviews. Con: Daily Worker, Star, New So-So: Nation. None in SRL.

Miss Liberty-Imperial, 7/15/49. Pro: Mirror, Sun, Journal American, Women's Wear Daily, Morning Telegraph, Billboard. Con: Times, Tribune, Variety, Theatre Arts, Commonweal, Cue, SRL, Time, New Republic. So-So: News, Post, World Telegram, Newsweek, Catholic World. Others unchecked.

Mister Roberts-Alvin, 2/13/48. Pro: 23 reviews. Con: Christian Science Monitor, So-So: Daily Worker, Nathan, Morning Telegraph. No review in Catholic World, Nation.

South Pacific Majestic, 4/8/49. Pro: Times, Tribune, News, Mirror, Post, Sun, Journal American, World Telegram, Women's Wear Daily, Journal of Commerce, Morning Telegraph, Variety, Billboard, Theatre Arts, Christian Science Monitor, SRL, Newsweek, New Yorker. So-So: Cue, Time. Others unchecked.

The Madwoman of Chaillot-Royale, 12/28/48. Pro: 20 reviews. Con: Mirror, Star, Post, Sun, Journal American, Journal of Commerce, Nation, Billboard, Nation. So-So: World Telegram, Eagle.

Where's Charley-St. James, 10/11/48. Pro: 16 reviews. Con: Post, Sun, Women's Wear Daily, Daily Worker, Billboard, Commonweal, Christian Science Monitor, SRL, Newsweek. So-So: Mirror, Time. None in Nation, Eagle unchecked.

NOTE: Reviewers are rates as to how they like the show, not if they think it will be a hit. "Pro" means the reviewers recommend the show for an entertaining or stimulating evening. "Con" means he doesn't recommend it as such. "So-So" means the reviewers didn't state his preference directly.

Index Of Digests - 1949-1950 Season

Browning Version-Coronet, 10/12/49. Pro: Times 890a, Tribune 890b, Mirror 890d, Compass 890c, Post 890f, Sun 890g, Telegram 890h, Journal American 890i, Eagle 890j, Newark News 890k, Women's Wear 890l, Morning Telegraph 890m, Daily Worker 885a, Wall Street Journal 886b, Journal of Commerce 886c, Variety 886e, Billboard 886f, Newsweek 886h. Cons: News 890c, Nathan 886d, New Yorker 886i, Time 886j, Cue 886k. So-So: Christian Science Monitor 886g.

Touch And Go-Broadhurst, 10/13/49. Pro: Times 891a, News 891c, Post 891f, World Telegram 891i, Newark News 891k, Women's Wear Daily 891-l, Journal of Commerce 887d, Morning Telegraph 887c, Newsweek 887h, Time 887i, New Yorker 887j, Cue 887i. Cons: Tribune 891b, Mirror 891d, Sun 891g, Wall Street Journal 887c, Variety 887f, Billboard 887g. So-So: Journal American 891h.

Yes, M'Lord-Booth, 10/4/49. Pro: Tribune 896g, News 896h, Compass 896j, Post 897a, Sun 897b, World Telegram 897d, Newark News 897f, Wall Street Journal 897g, Morning Telegraph 897i, Journal of Commerce 897j, Billboard 893d, Christian Science Monitor 897g, Newsweek 893g, New Yorker 893i, New Republic 887a, Commonweal 880b. Cons: Times 896f, Mirror 896i, Journal American 897c, Daily Worker 893b, Cue 893c, Time 893h. So-So: Eagle 897c, Women's Wear 897h, Variety 893c, Nathan 880a.

Twelfth Night-Empire, 10/3/49. Pro: Times 895a, Eagle 895j, Newark News 895k, Journal of Commerce 896c, Morning Telegraph 896d, Variety 896c, Christian Science Monitor 892c, Newsweek 892f, SRL 880f, Commonweal 880g. Cons: Tribune 895b, News 895c, Mirror 895d, Compass 895c, Journal American 895h, World Telegram 895i, Nathan 892b, Cue 893d, New Yorker 892h. So-So: Post 895f, Sun 895g, Daily Worker 892a, Billboard 892c.

Closed Shows 1949-1950 Season

Gilbert & Sullivan Company-Hellinger, 10/4/49 - 10/22/49. 897k, 898a-k, 892i-l, 893a, 8842-1, 885a-m.

Shows of Past Seasons That Close in 1949-1950

Ann of the Thousand Days - 12/8/48 - 10/8/49

Blackouts - 9/6/49 - 10/15/49

Capsule Critiques by N.Y.Sun's Hi Phillips

Detective Story Arresting Play

Lost In The Stars. Majesty

Regina All the Hubbards Went to the Musical Cupboards

